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FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION
ON THE STATUS OF THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL WORKFORCE
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Good morning Chairman Mica, Congressman DeFazio, Members of the Subcommittee: I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss the status of the Federal Aviation Administration's air traffic controller workforce and our plans to ensure that we have a sufficient number of qualified controllers to safely meet the capacity and air traffic needs of the future. As I have stated many times, FAA has an extraordinarily dedicated and talented workforce, but we must face the reality that our workforce is aging. We are facing a unique situation as the large number of air traffic controllers who were hired in the early 1980's in the aftermath of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike becomes eligible to retire. Our challenge is knowing when and where controllers will be needed in order to ensure that the right controllers are in the right facilities at the right time. And we have to do this in the most cost efficient and effective way possible. As I said to you last month when I discussed the newly created Air Traffic Organization, decision-making will be data-driven and must be based on safety and cost considerations.

Historically, FAA has been extremely accurate in predicting the rate at which controllers will leave the agency. The complication we are facing, and one I know all of us testifying today agree upon, is that the number of controllers who will either become eligible to retire or required to retire will increase dramatically in the coming years.

Again, I think we can all agree that there must be no disruption to safety and the efficient movement of aircraft as we work through the anticipated retirements.

We are in the process of obtaining facility-specific information that will help improve our planning process. Deciding when to retire is an extremely personal decision that varies from individual to individual. The decision can be affected by the economy, or any number of personal factors such as children, tuition, mortgages, or what the individual wants to do after retirement; countless intangibles that are unique to each retirement decision. We know through historical data that the majority of controllers, more than 75% of them, do not choose to retire the first year that they are eligible, but the extent to which that statistic will continue to be accurate in the future is unclear and is why we are working to obtain better information – or information that will enable us to analyze our needs at a more granular level. All government agencies will face the challenges of an aging workforce and increasing retirements, but FAA's situation is further complicated by the fact that most air traffic controllers are required to retire at age 56.

Today, we staff the controller workforce to a standard that is the result of a formula that considers a range of factors, such as type of facility, shift length, number of sectors, hours of operation, traffic mix and aviation forecasts to name a few. Under the provisions of the 1998 National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) contract, we negotiated a specific number of controllers at the national level. We further negotiated that number to the regional level and then again at the facility level. Although the national staffing agreement expired on September 30, 2003, our agreement to work with NATCA to

distribute positions to regions and priority locations continues. The number of controllers determined by the staffing standard is calculated each year and is based on the FAA's aviation forecast data projecting traffic volume. Obviously, the number of controllers in the workforce is not static, so the number determined by the staffing standard is one we target to achieve during the course of the year. This fiscal year, the number we are working with is 15,136. We expect to continue to use updated output from our staffing standards to make future hiring decisions. I do not believe the increased retirement numbers we are facing invalidate the use of our staffing standards. I believe that continued use of the staffing standard process will address both the need to replace retiring controllers and the need for more controllers to meet future traffic demands.

But the right number of controllers is only part of the puzzle. They have to be placed in the appropriate facility and trained to meet the challenges of that facility. This is extremely important because not every controller has to be trained to the same level and it does not require four to five years to train every single controller. Certainly, working in a complex facility with a challenging mix and amount of air traffic will require a different kind and amount of training than a controller working at a less complex facility. Similarly, the ratio of fully certified controllers to developmental controllers that is operationally acceptable differs from facility to facility. And because traffic throughout the country is dynamic, constant adjustments must be made. For example, just a few years ago St. Louis, as a hub for TWA and then American Airlines, was a more demanding aviation environment than it is today now that American has severely reduced its operations out of St. Louis. Likewise, a few years ago Ft. Lauderdale was a far less

demanding air traffic-operating environment than it is today. These are examples of why constant adjustments must continue to be made as to where and how we staff individual facilities.

We are working with NATCA to identify staffing requirements and potential shortages at each facility. We need to take advantage of the talent pool that can most readily meet our needs. Certain candidates have a demonstrated ability to perform these duties, such as former military controllers, or candidates from training programs such as the Collegiate Training Initiative (CTI) school(s) or the Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) Air Traffic Control Training Program.

It is well documented that the ability to perform the duties of an air traffic controller can be done only through effective training. We are, therefore, looking at ways to improve our training and shorten the time it takes to train our controller workforce. This may require a greater investment in simulator training that will achieve both those goals. But such an investment will mean reevaluating our priorities in order to maximize the impact of our investment dollars. As I stated at the outset, our investment decisions must be justified by either cost savings or increased safety and efficiency, and that holds true for how we invest in training. Clearly, our future controller needs will require an additional investment in training, and, cooperating with input from NATCA, we look forward to designing the most effective training system that will allow us to efficiently train new controllers.

Mr. Chairman, we are well aware of the challenges we face over our future controller staffing requirements, and the fact that the agency must prepare for those challenges. We will have to streamline our hiring practices, train our new controllers efficiently and manage our workforce productively. Since the early 1990's, because our turnover rate has been relatively low, our hiring practice has been to hire in the same year in which we lose a controller. This has allowed us to maintain about 85% fully certified professional controllers (CPC) and 15% developmental controllers, the latter being certified and productive on one or more operational positions. As anticipated attrition in our controller workforce increases, the current practice of hiring one-for-one will not be sufficient to address this retirement surge. We must also be careful to maintain an appropriate balance of CPC's and developmental controllers. Again, we are looking at ways to expedite the training process for new controllers and to place controllers at facilities with existing or projected staff shortfalls. The success of these efforts will have a significant affect on the timing and magnitude of hiring new staff.

While planning for the future we must also pursue initiatives that will enhance the productivity of our current workforce. These include addressing staffing imbalances where they exist by hiring only into those facilities where controllers are needed, or moving personnel from overstaffed facilities to places that need more controllers, and, where possible, using CPC transfers at no expense to the government. I should note that NATCA has been very helpful in facilitating such relocation opportunities. We have also developed pilot programs to measure more correctly a controller's productive work time, and to reduce the cost of controllers in the workman's compensation program with the

hope of seeing the return of some individuals to productive status. We have also begun a program to educate employees on proper sick leave usage with a goal of reducing the overall sick leave usage rate by eight percent this fiscal year. Finally, at Congress' request, we are preparing regulations that would permit a controller, under certain conditions, to remain in the workforce beyond the mandatory separation age of 56.

We have no misconception that these measures will fully address the expected sharp increase in controller attrition rates, but we hope that they will ease some of the staffing problems facing the agency in the near term.

Finally, I would like to provide some preliminary highlights from a report that we are preparing at the request of this Committee that was contained in *Vision 100.* The report will serve as an action plan that I believe will effectively address many of the concerns around this issue. As directed, the report will be complete in December.

In preparing the report, our initial findings indicate that we must intensify our focus on training, ensure appropriate distribution of developmental controllers throughout our facilities, and make greater use of simulation in training.

With safety being our paramount concern, the fundamental principle for training is that it cannot add risk. As I stated, we know that training is unique to each controller option and facility, as well as the individual experience the student brings to the job. Part of our review showed that we must be particularly careful when decreasing training time, because depending on the experience of the controller, the training required to reach full

certification can vary from 18 months to 33 months. We need to be careful not to move controllers in training to the floor too quickly.

As I mentioned earlier, we are focusing on the ratio of developmental controllers to certified professional controllers. Our study shows that there must be a careful balance to optimize safety and efficiency. We must manage the flow of developmentals to ensure that there are not an excessive number of trainees at any one location. Our study to this point indicates that adequate time on-position - - controlling traffic - - with an instructor is key to the training for each developmental.

The report will also detail that the FAA is looking at increasing the use of high-fidelity training simulators to decrease the time and the overall cost of controller training. The increased use of more sophisticated simulators will produce the same kind of cost-effective training we've seen in the training of airline pilots. We hope to leverage the available technology to find meaningful application of simulators that will accelerate the training and facility checkout time for all new controllers. MITRE recently completed a worldwide survey that has led to the successful development of a prototype that we believe will be of value to our efforts.

The report will describe a training plan that examines: the expected level of knowledge of new hires; (2) the number of trainees by quarter; (3) the expected number of trainees by course; (4) the number of instructors required; (5) the number of OJT hours required; and (6) a schedule for the release of trainees to facilities.

In conclusion, I want to thank both GAO and the IG's office for their work in this area. The information they have provided has been very helpful as we develop our plan of action. I know that everyone who has looked into this matter recognizes the challenge we are facing, but I remain confident that it is a challenge we will meet in order to continue to have the safest and most efficient air traffic control system in the world.

This concludes by statement. I will be happy to answer your questions at this time.